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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *editor.platypusreview@gmail.com*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society
The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s-30s), "New" (1960s-70s) and post-political (1980s-90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

The Platypus Review

Issue 144 | March 2022

1 **The more things change, the more they stay the same**
A response to Canel and Jacobs
David Duhalde

2 **How long is the end of history?**
Connor Harney

3 **"Before you can be a pirate, you have to sail in the navy"**
An interview with Gus Sanchez
Laurie Rojas and W. Xiao

WWW:

The usable Gramsci?
Martin Thomas

144

platypus1917.org

The more things change, the more they stay the same

A response to Canel and Jacobs

David Duhalde

THERE IS ALWAYS A BIT OF (even much) truth in clichés such as this.[1] But such folksy catchphrases can serve as necessary, if not superior, complements to sophisticated analysis.

I joined the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in 2003 — probably about two decades after Tom Canel and roughly a decade before D. L. Jacobs. Like many active members at the time, regardless of our age, there was a great sympathy to Michael Harrington and the other DSA founders, especially about the strategy of realignment to shift the Democratic Party to the Left. As I got more active and took on leadership roles (an easy feat back then as hardly any elections were contested), I began to sense the political rhetoric didn't match organizing reality around DSA's relationship with the Democratic Party.

As Jacobs describes in his three caricatures of 2010s Leftists, whether friend or foe on the Left, DSA before the Trump election would have been described as attempting to be a pressure group within the Democratic Party, even if that was not the stated purpose. A more friendly summation of that strategy would state that DSA's goal was to make the Democratic agenda into a social democratic one. A more unsympathetic portrait would say DSA tied its political fortunes to supporting Democratic candidates over socialist ones. But a closer look would find neither of these fully grasped the actual program even if they both had grains of truth, as Jacobs admits his caricatures cannot capture the full nuance of reality.

DSA effectively — at least at the national level — did not really have much of an electoral program during the early to mid-2000s when I joined as a member then staff. ("Electoral" here is specifically about electing candidates and passing ballot measures.) The roughly two dozen or so local chapters did endorse — nearly universally but not exclusively — Democratic politicians. Nothing existed then like today where DSA regional formations can deliver dozens of canvassers, field their own members, and be decisive players in downballot elections. The DSA I joined was such a minor political player, whose diminutive description may still be a bit generous. It would not seriously discuss long-term electoral strategy, much less party building.

A root of this lack of strategic horizon can be found in a series of missteps and lacklustre interventions of DSA into federal politics in the 1990s. That decade, it formed a federal Political Action Committee that largely endorsed nearly everyone in the Congressional Progressive Caucus, hardly distinguishing itself from other liberal-Left groups. An effort to electioneer for Paul Wellstone, the stalwart liberal Minnesota U.S. Senator who also had been the YDSA club advisor at Carleton College, ending up sparking an IRS investigation. While DSA was ultimately exonerated, such a costly and time-consuming distraction for an organization with around $200,000 budget and three staff was at best demoralizing. DSA made its first presidential endorsement in 16 years when it backed John Kerry's unsuccessful White House bid in 2004. The socialist group avoided intervening in that years' primary, which pitted Dennis Kucinich against Howard Dean as membership was nearly equally split between those primary contenders.

During George W. Bush's reelection, a group took on the mantle of Kucinich's presidential campaign. Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) began organizing in the way people said DSA did. Directly citing the Democratic Agenda strategy of 1980s Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (a DSA predecessor formation), PDA used an inside-outside strategy. This meant they saw themselves as a bridge between Democratic lawmakers and Party institutions with unions, social movements, and other social forces. PDA's tactics include relationships with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and helping shape similar caucuses in state and other party formations outside of the federal level. This engagement in the internal Democratic Party was notably absent in DSA's activist reality — at least nationally.

This century, national DSA has not significantly engaged in internal Democratic Party matters. This is critical because if we think DSA believes in realigning the Democrats into something more Left or simply is tied to the Party, then we'd expect some meaningful intra-party participation. As I have written in *Dissent*, DSA has done some internal Democratic party work, even since Trump's election, at the national level, but nothing really more than signing onto statements.[2] Outside of Washington, DSA members might engage in party work but they do so as themselves with little interest (maybe even hostility) from their own chapters.

DSA's focus away from party work and more on candidates also reflects how election law and the zeitgeist around campaigns has changed over the past 20 years. Two critical factors influence this:

1. The *Citizens United v. FEC* Supreme Court ruling in 2010 makes it much easier for nonprofits such as DSA to mobilize and spend in elections.
2. Many local races have a national character now as technology and fundraising operations make it much easier for outsiders to intervene in competitions far away from their home.

Prior to the *Citizens United* decision, 501c4 nonprofits such as DSA could make endorsements but had strict spending limits. Because a 501c4 is technically a corporation, in many states and localities it could not make contributions or even coordinate with candidates.[3] This stifled political programs. Especially for cash-strapped groups such as DSA. One way to get around this was to establish a political action committee (PAC). A PAC is a legal body that can make contributions to candidates and other electoral bodies. DSA re-engaged its federal PAC partly to organize for Sanders's first run for the US senate in 2006.

The PAC allowed DSA to coordinate with Sanders's senatorial campaign, which otherwise would have been prohibited. The small socialist collective raised around $60,000 for his successful candidacy — about one percent of his total contributions. Nearly unimaginable today, Bernie Sanders also attended several of the fundraisers across the country himself that netted only a few thousand dollars each. I attended one in New York City where he gave an amazing speech discussing how groups such as DSA believe civilization had not yet begun. Reflecting the disorganization of the time, of course, no one recorded it.

DSA's subsequent PAC interventions over the next few years were much less successful. The group attempted to donate $100 to Joe Lieberman's 2006 primary opponent, Ned Lamont. The *New York Post* reported the contribution and the Lamont campaign quickly refunded the small amount (but encouraged DSA members to give as individuals).[4] Little could be said of the national political program. In fact, when I was on the DSA leadership in 2010, we failed to even symbolically back socialist writer Dan La Botz's Socialist-Party-nominated Ohio senate run because our staff never informed us of La Botz's interest in an endorsement. (This incident inspired me as deputy director in the mid-2010s to propose a formal endorsement process that would leave the final decisions to the DSA leadership, not staff.)

The election of Barack Obama and the subsequent disappointment in him didn't bode well for interest in the Left electing anyone. *Jacobin* magazine even ran an article by me and Will Emmons, a former DSA youth leader, where we wrote that socialists should just abstain from presidential elections altogether.[5] In the piece, we argued that energy was best spent on local races. Further, we said the Left had no influence on national politics, especially the contest for the White House, and any effort spent on that was little better than naval gazing. Two years later, Bernie Sanders would begin his campaign for the Oval Office and invalidate our thesis.

What we didn't understand at the time was how much Occupy would change Left politics and the extent that *Citizens United* could empower DSA's work. Occupy gave the world new vocabulary and frames to discuss inequality, especially for the middle class, even though it wasn't exactly the class struggle espoused by socialists: phrases like "we are the 99%" and "I am more than a loan." However, the direct-action nature of Occupy very much fit with the uprising in Wisconsin against the governor's anti-union proposals. The action of labor and the elected Democrats failed in the end to stop the bill that gutted the public-sector unions. But it demonstrated for the first time in a while an openness to Democratic politics outside of lobbying to mount a public offense against capital.

Sanders's challenge to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary was empowered largely by a party base that echoed the sentiments of Occupy. The Brooklyn-born senator used slogans straight from the streets of Manhattan. His insurgent candidacy also benefited from the Supreme Court decision he detested. The new *Citizens United* rules allowed DSA to spend "unlimited" amounts of money if it worked independently of the campaign.

While DSA would not have expenditures rivaling the Koch Brothers, much less most union locals, the new law allowed the socialist group more flexibility than what contribution limits permitted. Federal contribution limits are under $6,000, which would have seriously hampered any effort to meaningfully support Sanders. DSA ended up spending some tens of thousands of dollars in backing Sanders. In turn, the organization also grew by tens of thousands after Donald Trump defeated Clinton. Interestingly, while originally scorned by the center-Left, investigative journalist Rachel Cohen found that Democrats are more likely to use Super PACs than Republicans.[6]

Sanders's association with democratic socialism (although never a member himself) lifted DSA's profile. An overwhelming number of young people seeking to resist Trump's incoming presidency and hoping to find community joined DSA. Many of them turned to electoral politics that they now saw could be a way to elect socialists or at least accountable progressives. Technological changes in electioneering made this also much easier to channel this new volunteer energy.

A decade earlier, fundraising for Sanders was a time-consuming process largely done through collecting checks and cash donations while hoping that people would send the correct paperwork back. Now, online donation portals have smoothed the process. Paper call lists with disconnected numbers were replaced by automatic and internet-based systems, in which activists could reach phones through their computers. Texting, emails, and social media

"The more things change" continues on page 4

"Before you can be a pirate, you have to sail in the navy"

An interview with Gus Sanchez

Laurie Rojas and W. Xiao

On April 6, 2019, Platypus Affiliated Society members Laurie Rojas and W. Xiao interviewed Gus Sanchez, an organizer, technologist, and member of Chicago Democratic Socialists of America (CDSA), at the 11th Annual Convention of the Platypus Affiliated Society at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to discuss the Chicago mayoral election and the politics of the DSA. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion and the Q&A that followed.

Introduction

Gus Sanchez, born in New York, studied public policy and political science at the University of Chicago. After graduating, he moved to Oakland, California to work for a center-Left polling firm. After the primary elections of 2016 came to a close in June of that year, Gus moved back to Chicago to work for Civis Analytics — one of the major vendors to the institutional committees of the Democratic Party, and led the Democratic Senatorial Coordinating Committee, as well as various campaigns and issue-advocacy organizations. Currently, Gus works with an organization called the Movement Cooperative, which plays a central role in the coordination of anti-establishment non-party groups and the maintenance of their data and technological infrastructure. A long admirer of the DSA organization, it was not until after the victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) in New York that Gus became a dues-paying member of the DSA and began working with CDSA-endorsed candidates in Chicago to try to replicate the success of AOC in New York and develop the new playbook for defeating long-time Democratic incumbents.

Interview

Laurie Rojas: You joined the DSA as a result of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign. What was that moment about for you?

Gus Sanchez: In my professional life, I do work related to electoral politics. There is a whole class of professionals who learn how to do this work. It involves a digital and technical strategy. I had not been a dues-paying member of the DSA until she won, but previously I had been going to meetings. It was the community through which we were able to debate Leftist ideas with representatives from all ideological schools. I found that to be a very productive space. But in my mind, I was waiting to see when the DSA would mature to the extent that it would try and take some form of state power through electoral politics. For me, AOC winning was the signal that it was "go time." The electorate is somewhat ready to buy what we're trying to sell them.

LR: Why should the Left care about the DSA? Why is the DSA important for the Left to pay attention to?

GS: I think the DSA is probably the premier platform for exchange of Leftist ideas. The vast majority of the members probably are not aligned with the people in this room. But they're people you can actually have the conversation with and could potentially be persuaded. If I were Platypus and I wanted to increase my membership, the DSA is the first group of people I would talk to. They would be most receptive.

LR: The DSA is of course the Democratic Socialists of America and has a history of commitment to socialism. How does the DSA advance, in your sense, the objective of socialism?

GS: It's multi-pronged: the electoral aspect is very new for the DSA. Up until that point, it was community organizing, having conversations, education, reading groups — very similar to what you all are doing. Small community organizations where people can actually discuss these ideas and keep them alive.

LR: What is socialism for you?

GS: I currently think about socialism as an exploration of essentially alternative means to figuring out how we can democratically control and produce the means to produce various goods in society. I'm a technologist; I pay very close attention to automation and how technology is evolving, and I see a tremendous potential there. In some potential future, robots are going to be doing most of the work. But the question is, who owns those robots, and how are the fruits of their labor distributed across society? Are they democratically controlled? Is the direction of those corporations democratically controlled? Do we even have corporations?

W. Xiao: The way that you define socialism is about the democratic control of production, and some sort of democratic distribution of the output of production. So in light of that, to push on Laurie's question, how exactly is the DSA pushing us into that future of controlling the means of production? Aligned with that, where do you see the relationship between the DSA and the Democratic Party — how is it operating symbiotically or not to push forward that vision?

GS: I'm going to table that second question, and remind me if I forget. It's a very important question. To the first question, how is the DSA or the CDSA pushing for socialism? Education is huge. I think you all understand the value of education and dialogue in terms of shaping minds — particularly young minds — in terms of support. The long shot is sweeping legislatures across the country and actually implementing various policies. We've used a lot of polling to identify potential policies that are popular that we can advocate for and push incumbents to support or to use as leverage to evict them from their current positions. I've actually brought a couple of questions from the DSA. The CDSA has a questionnaire that it uses to vet candidates before endorsing them. I think some of these — whether they're pushing for socialism the way that you all conceive it or not — are representative of how the DSA thinks of its priorities. The first two questions are, "Are you a socialist?" and "Are you ready to win?" Obviously they want to win elections. One of the more interesting questions is, "Do you support the establishment of banks owned and democratically controlled by the state or municipal government?" That is, democratic control of financial institutions, then obviously minimum wage, legalizing pot, legalizing sex work — things that get people penalized for living a particular way or getting caught doing something but may not warrant destroying their life in our society. A lot of it is liberating people from current structures.

LR: Why work within the Democratic Party when there is a history during the 20th century, at least since the 60s, where Leftist movements and labor organizations have ended up being used by the Democratic Party? Has there been a liquidation of actual socialist politics as a result of working through the Democratic Party?

GS: For me, it's more of a professional choice. I have a theory that before you can be a pirate, you have to sail in the navy. If you look at legendary pirates, they all learned to sail in the navy. They got navy wages that were shit, but they turned around and started stealing people's shit. My working for the Democrats is my figuring out their strategies, how they use data to manipulate the masses to achieve their objectives and learning how that works, getting good at that, and then potentially neutralizing it, or using it to actually spread ideas and messaging that are more aligned with the future we want to see.

WX: To push on Laurie's question a bit more: in the past, there have been repeated attempts by the radical Left to use and instrumentalize the infrastructure of the Democratic Party. But it seems that in a lot, or nearly all, of those cases, the Leftists have actually been the ones used or instrumentalized. Why is this time different?

GS: I want to emphasize the word you use, "infrastructure." The Democratic Party has data on everyone who's ever voted for them. It tracks you across time, where you live, that kind of thing. The Left — or, I'm not going to say, the Left; I'm going to say, the DSA and its coalitionary body — we're building our own infrastructure. We are trying to be totally independent of the party. The DCCC (Democratic Congressional Coordinating Committee) has sent out a warning to all vendors on the Democratic Party side of politics: if you choose to work for somebody who's trying to unseat an incumbent, you will no longer get business from the Democratic Party.

We've created a "blacklist" for anybody who wants to try to beat an incumbent: it's a list of any socialist, anybody who is going to be disadvantaged in an electoral race. We have a list of vendors for those candidates who are often sympathetic, if not outright socialist. There's a place for these candidates to go. We're building an infrastructure that is democratically controlled by the people in these organizations. DSA has elections for its committees that steer it. If electees of these DSA national committees were to go in a direction that the DSA's dues-paying members don't support, then they would be voted out.

WX: Just to clarify, your answer as to why it's different this time is that you think the DSA has a bargaining chip by which it can actually enforce its policy objectives in the Democratic Party, and that bargaining chip is the data that you own?

GS: I wouldn't say it's a bargaining chip. We are pretty explicitly at war with the Party at the moment. We don't take money from many of their top donors. I think the Party is as scared of the DSA as the Republicans are. You see Ocasio-Cortez being smeared across conservative media, which signals fear. There's something serious here that they're afraid of. But I think the party in and of itself participates in the same smears, so it's not as though we're friends. If there are policies on which we align, we'll most likely vote together as a bloc. But what you've seen is that the candidates that we do have in Congress now are very explicitly moving the Overton window. For those who aren't familiar with that concept, it's the idea that if we propose a radical policy very far to the Left, then when we compromise, we can get something closer to what we actually wanted, as opposed to putting the bargaining chip that we think they'll accept initially.

LR: The alderman elections in Chicago were a big victory for the DSA here. Could you talk a little bit about that, and also how it might function as a stepping stone? How do you understand the elections in terms of the task of moving towards socialism?

GS: It shouldn't be overlooked that the folks who win these elections — both AOC and the aldermen in Chicago — have a tremendous bully pulpit. They can get up and say whatever they want; it's covered in the news, and everybody — everybody who reads the news, at least — is exposed to those ideas. So, at a bare minimum, creating a stage to have that discussion in public as opposed to discussing things behind closed doors is quite important. In terms of how it actually occurred, most of these candidates were not affiliated with the Democratic Party in any way. In general, Chicago is pretty much all Democrats or independents who lean liberal, so we don't really worry about the Party as much; it doesn't really matter. The real question is, are they neoliberal or not? That's what separates the candidates. In terms of how they were drafted, many of these candidates decided to run seeking the DSA endorsement and then were endorsed.

I spent most of my time working at the 33rd ward for [now alderman] Rossana Rodriguez. Her family is from Puerto Rico, and she started an organization in Humboldt Park that is explicitly Leftist called the Chicago Boricua Resistance. When, as a founder of that organization, she went to the youths who run it now to get their endorsement, they held out their endorsement for a very long time because they were so skeptical of the merit of electoral politics that they didn't know if they wanted to compromise themselves in that way.

Eventually, they did end up endorsing her, which is probably for the better. But the fact that they had that internal dialogue about whether it was worth it or not and about what can come from it — I think that's quite interesting.

WX: Now that these individuals are in power or will be in power in Chicago, can you specify for us how the DSA intends to leverage or enforce your vision of socialism in Chicago? And if you could provide any examples in the past where the DSA has successfully done that, that would be helpful as well.

GS: One thing that the DSA has done without candidates is rent control. They've pushed rent-control ballot measures in various wards and have been pretty successful. That's actually independent of the candidates, but in general the candidates are pretty explicit with their policy preferences and positions.

We definitely want to delineate what we think of as the future goal of socialism in terms of short-term policy gains. I think people in the DSA recognize that short-term policy gains are still worth pursuing, but that's not ultimately where we want to go. However, as we pass those policies, as they become popular, it essentially puts people in a position where they're more likely to consider the kind of socialism that we're talking about, the socialism that we're actually trying to bring about.

LR: What is your particular relationship with this campaign, this work in the DSA, and with other socialist organizations? In what way are they participating or engaged?

GS: When the campaigns were endorsed by the DSA and the CDSA, it was basically a signal to all socialists in the city that if you're bored and have some time to volunteer, this is your candidate. So it's not like these campaigns were all DSA folks. People who were volunteering were from all kinds of socialist organizations. There were members of the ISO (International Socialist Organization); there were unaffiliated people from the neighborhood — normal humans. For the latter, it's maybe the first time they're interacting with socialists in a collaborative way, so you have to think that some of those ideas rub off on them. It was very common in our victory speeches and also our common parlance that we talk to each other as comrades. It was probably the only time I've ever seen a campaign address its volunteers as comrades and to be received with applause.

LR: The big news on the Left in the last few weeks, and particularly a few days ago, is the vote to completely dissolve the ISO. What are your thoughts on the dissolution of the ISO, particularly as it seems to be parallel to the rise and growth of the DSA from something like 10,000 members to 50,000 members over the course of the last two years?

GS: I know many people who are in the ISO. They typically tend to be older — it seems like an older organization. I think the DSA is really turning out to be a coalition of people of all different ideologies that we consider Leftist. It's becoming a larger umbrella of those groups and is potentially making those groups obsolete or unnecessary. They can still have whatever critique or particular vision they have, but unless we're coming together and actually creating a critical mass, it doesn't really matter that much.

LR: Is it a good thing that the ISO has dissolved itself?

GS: It's neutral. It probably doesn't matter that much because they'll probably fold into the DSA. I think their holding out on some sort of ideological line is not that useful.

WX: Looking ahead, what is the role that the DSA will play in 2020? What is the significance of 2020 for you?

GS: This is huge. The national DSA has recently decided that it's going to get really serious about electoral politics. One of the controversial things that their electoral committee did recently was to hands-down endorse Bernie Sanders, even though it's 2019, and we're still months away from the first primary.

WX: Can you clarify who decided to endorse Bernie Sanders?

GS: There are seven or nine members of the electoral committee out of 16, but I think they are elected from the national body at large.

WX: These 16 made this decision on behalf of the 50,000 or so people in the DSA?

GS: Yeah. There were a lot of complaints about the decision. New York, Chicago, and I think one other city outright endorsed Bernie Sanders as well, and those are typically what I think of as the real hot spots of DSA activism. But there are much smaller chapters throughout the country that were pretty upset that the DSA nationally just threw its weight behind him without extracting any concessions or forcing him to say certain things. Many of the working groups and subcommittees felt that, "Hey, our demand was not made; you've left us out!" There was an explicit call for forcing him to support reparations, which is something that Bernie Sanders has been reluctant to support publicly. Even if he actually supports it, it's something that he's not quite willing to say for strategic reasons.

WX: If I can characterize or summarize what I think your rough political thesis is at this point, it's that you and many other members of the DSA believe that you can in fact build your own infrastructure in parallel with the Democratic Party and thereby coerce the Democratic Party, utilizing its infrastructure to achieve certain policy objectives. So, what would the failure of this thesis look like? What developments would make you conclude that you had either succeeded or that you had failed, that the thesis was right or wrong?

GS: We're not entirely trying to coerce Democrats to support certain things. Rather, we're really trying to take their jobs. We really want them to no longer be in positions of power at all and to systematically replace them across the board.

WX: Replacing the people in the Democratic Party?

GS: No, I mean, replacing their candidates. When we talk about the Democratic Party, it's a really loose coalition of people who might not even like the Democrats that much, but as voters they choose to vote for them often. Really, when we think about the Democratic Party in terms of its base, turnout for primaries is particularly low. For mayoral elections — for example, for Chicago municipal elections — it's a 30–35% turnout rate. Primaries typically have a much lower turnout than that. So the body that chooses which candidates represent the party and what the party becomes is a very small group of people, and if you're able to stack those elections with a surge of youth turnout or a surge of socialist turnout, you can pick whomever you like. That's what Ocasio-Cortez was able to do. The election she ran in had historically very low turnout, and she was able to increase turnout so much that they were unable to beat her even though they spent ten times the amount of money.

LR: Xiao also mentioned the optimism you have regarding the Millennial Left — the new generation of Millennials in the DSA — and its role in the 2020 election. Why do you think that the millennials who have now entered the DSA en masse will succeed where the older New Left generation of Harringtonites did not?

GS: I'm not going to say that I think they're going to succeed. We're fighting against impossible odds. What is it that Platypus says? Our efforts are "improbable — but not impossible." There's no guarantee of success. We're going to struggle against the long odds and see what we can do. But I would argue that any sort of material gains in the short term that make people's lives better off are worth spending energy on. If we sit back and just let whatever's going to happen happen, things will continue to get worse materially, for workers, for the poor, for people who are discriminated against by the system structurally. Addressing their needs in the short term is helpful and also brings them into a long-term coalition that we can then leverage for actual change.

LR: But what is different about now as opposed to the past? I feel that what you're describing is what I would have associated with the older New Left generation of the DSA. What about this moment seems to be an opportunity? Because it's still the same Democratic Party.

GS: Think not about the DSA, and not about the Democratic party, but think about the generation that's coming up independent of those two things. Statistically, we're the first generation that is on track to be worse off than our parents. We're questioning the American Dream in a way that hasn't been done before, and that's led us to rethink this initial resistance to socialism or socialist ideas which the older generation has typically maintained. What is most important is this resurgent effort to actually consider those ideas seriously. Whether they do the Democrats, or they do the DSA, or they start their own party — it's not that important.

Anybody who's ever started a third party in the U.S. loses after a while. There are very sneaky ways that you can destroy a fledgling party before it has any foundations. We saw this with the conservative Reform Party. They tried to take power from the Republicans back to the conservative side. What happened there is, Roger Stone said, let's recruit Donald Trump to essentially destroy that primary process and destroy any possibility for them to take power from the Republicans.

So when we think about Democrats and electoral politics, I see a great thing. It's as if we can steal a bunch of these seats, control the news media, and put our candidates out there. That gives our candidates the kind of leverage such that if they actually do want to start their own party, they have a foundation and a following to be able to do that. So we may see at some point an actual split between the Democrats and those creating a more socialist party. Now, will that party be truly socialist or not? It's unclear. But that schism is already brewing, and we may see it occur in a very concrete way in the near future.

WX: Earlier you said that the objective of the DSA right now is to take the jobs of the Democrats. In the past, you've expressed optimism about 2020. You say it will be all Millennial Leftists sitting in the subcommittees of the Democratic Party figuring out how to allocate resources to different candidates and deciding which candidates to back. If this were truly the case, what should we expect to see of the Democrats in 2020 versus in 2016?

GS: A lot of infighting, very contentious public arguments, a changing between the old guard and the newer up-and-coming candidates. It's really going to intensify. Right now, there are several organizations that are undergoing this analytic process of identifying all the seats throughout the country where we think the incumbents are vulnerable enough to actually defeat them. And once that list exists, it's going to mobilize all of these organizations, which are mostly not Party affiliated, to back those candidates. Not in a coordinated sense because that's illegal, but in a parallel shadow support sense.

Q&A

As a CDSA member of the Labor Working Group, I'd like to get your thoughts on DSA member and alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa's endorsement of Toni Preckwinkle, who lost 75% to 25%. He backed a machine candidate. What happens with CDSA as a result of Lori Lightfoot, a former President of the Chicago Police Board, being elected? What happens with us backing a machine candidate, Preckwinckle, for the Democrats? I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on this in light of Joe Biden's 20-point lead over Bernie Sanders. What happens to the DSA nationally if Joe Biden becomes president?

GS: The Electoral Working Group explicitly said that we were not going to engage in mayoral politics at all. We would reserve our strength in these aldermanic seats with the explicit goal of creating a socialist caucus. So for that reason, we sat out for the most part. Now, why Carlos chose to endorse Toni Preckwinkle is, I think, a political choice. Preckwinkle is a very powerful politician in Chicago. She has been President of the Cook County Board for a very long time. I personally think that she was probably the only candidate who could've beaten Rahm Emanuel back in the day. Instead, we had the catastrophic

"Before you can be a pirate" continues on page 4

"The more things change," cont. from page 1

made it much easier to mobilize newly activated people to electioneering outside of their districts.

But these young socialists did not turn this change into wanting to shift the Democratic Party. These new activists had not come from a Left where the workers' party question was central. For them, there was little reason to question running Democrats. But certainly, given the blame placed on the Democratic National Committee for stopping Sanders's success, there was a principle to avoid building the Democratic Party. This feeling was not shared by Bernie Sanders or other groups close to him.

Activists inspired to do Democratic Party building could do so, much more easily, through activist groups PDA and the Bernie Sanders-inspired Our Revolution than through DSA. In fact, despite Sanders's once-genuine independent streak, by 2016 he was much more committed to the Democratic Party and reforming it than Barack Obama ever was. Sanders called on his supporters to join their local parties and make them more accountable. Our Revolution and other Bernie-aligned groups (including DSA) pushed with some moderately successful reforms coming out of the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Obama, on the other hand, while president, abandoned Dean's 50-state strategy to build the Party nationally and lacked interest in building the Democratic brand, costing the Party nearly 1,000 seats during the president's tenure.

We see two critical contradictions here that are lost in party-building discourse around DSA and the Bernie era:

1. Sanders himself, while never formally joining the Democrats in a meaningful way, had a real and material commitment to shifting the Party to the Left and encouraging followers to do so.
2. DSA, whose reputation — much more than Sanders — was tied more to the Democrats was largely absent from any real internal work in that mass Party.

This matters because this reality is not due to changes in the new DSA. Both sides — those desiring to make DSA into something it was not and those trying to preserve its legacy — exaggerate how much the newcomers have changed DSA around electoral strategy. I specifically write "strategy" because I stated before, in terms of election success, that the new DSA is much more successful than the old one, although the previous iterations in the 1980s and 1990s might have had subjectively more loyalty from its elected — especially higher-ranking — officials, such as mayors and congresspeople.

Tom Canel argues correctly, in his response to Jacobs, that DSA's putative and public electoral debates are around a "dirty break." The dirty break concept is simply that socialists will one day be able to build enough infrastructure and voter loyalty to be able to split off from the Democratic Party and form a new workers' party. Tom is likewise right that this marks a huge change in the DSA rhetoric that saw itself as part of a broader anti-Republican movement and as part of the bases of the Democratic Party, even if not of the party itself, such as labor, feminism, racial justice, and more. However, I find myself pushing back here not because of what is said, but because of who the audience is. The audience for these debates largely is for DSA members and some Leftists. Outside of this milieu, few care or understand. That matters for real-world impact.

Of course, Left-wing debates can be esoteric. They are largely ignored by those not already in the anti-capitalist movement. But elections are the main venue in which most people engage with politics. They serve as the venue in which socialists most reach out to the general public. In New York, several establishment Democrats such as centrist New York Congressman Tom Suozzi have encouraged socialists to form a party. Never mind the hypocrisy of corporate Democrats that would soon condemn the same Leftists and Greens for costing Al Gore the 2000 election. (DSA neither endorsed Gore nor Ralph Nader, but still suffered residual blame for the Democrat's loss for which the Green Party was primarily blamed.) The fact that anti-socialist Democrats want us out of the Party demonstrates that it still remains most effective to run candidates in the primaries as Democrats in order to elect socialists.

The more strength socialists get in and around the Democratic Party — largely winning offices and pushing legislation — the harder it will be to break with the Party. This is the dirty little secret. DSA's current electoral strategy roughly is "elect more socialists" with the goals of building a broader infrastructure to train candidates and pass progressive public policy. But there is no consensus on how to govern with most Democrats or how to achieve a dirty break.

In fact, I share the critique of Tim Horras from Philly Socialists that the dirty-break discussion is almost an epiphenomenal impact of DSA's increasing electoral power. Although this debate commands the attention of many of the most active members within DSA, those outside of the organization remain generally ignorant of the discussion, since, despite the sometimes heated rhetoric, it has yet to have any impact on the DSA's electoral program or outcomes. While we disagree on the validity of building class power through the Democratic primary, we concur that in the end the majority of DSA activists are not willing to make the step to be totally independent of the Democratic Party infrastructure.

At the 2021 DSA Convention, for instance, delegates balked at efforts to research alternatives to VAN, a Democratic Party proprietary voter-contact program. Proponents of such research said fairly that it was necessary to begin the process of building independent infrastructure that does not rely on the Democratic establishment. Their concerns have legitimacy. Byron Brown, the Buffalo mayor who defeated DSA member India Walton in the general election, running as a write-in still had access to VAN after losing the Democratic primary. Still, arguments of cost defeated the measure. Delegates such as myself could not justify potential spending millions on programming in light of other pressing needs.

In addition, the delegates defeated proposals that would have forced elected DSA members not to endorse corporate Democrats in general elections. Opponents were concerned about feasibility and flexibility: shouldn't we allow individual members the choice to endorse candidates as long as they don't go against the organization's wishes? As the recent uproar concerning Jamaal Bowman and DSA over his trip to Israel and his vote for the Iron Dome demonstrate, it is not so easy to discipline our elected officials, much less get consensus about whether it is correct to do so. A number of chapters and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions working group called for Bowman's expulsion. The national DSA leadership, while critical of Bowman and certainly not sanguine on him receiving an endorsement again, rejected this effort. When push came to shove, DSA stuck by its elected member for the time being.[7]

While it is difficult to imagine the old DSA ever trying to push out an elected official, the fact that it did not happen demonstrates the lack of majority appetite for major changes that would swing DSA in totally new directions. DSA has changed in rhetoric and putative goals. But the actual changes, especially when it comes to real world actions, are less clear.

It is critical to cut past the rhetoric and see what has not changed in the new DSA. For instance, DSA is not conducting internal reform work within the Democratic Party as an organization. Individual members may do so, but they are not DSA's representatives. The socialist organization still largely supports candidates running as Democrats (including the nonpartisan elections). DSA did occasionally endorse a Green when I first joined, which we joked back then put us to the Left of the Communist Party, USA which genuinely only would support Democrats. In two critical ways, DSA has not really changed: it isn't trying to reform the Democratic Party and it is largely supporting Democratic candidates.

So what has changed besides conversations around hypothetical breaks? For one, DSA has a much stricter line about who can get endorsed regardless of their party affiliation. Today, DSA is much more wont to endorse only socialists — especially national endorsements — than in years before.

DSA also has much more volunteer and fundraising capacity. As civil society weakens, especially organized labor, DSA members can be a make-or-break volunteer pool and campaign staff for downballot candidates. Even AOC's campaign team is heavily staffed with local socialists. This gives the growing socialist organization some pride and ability to leverage with the elected candidates. While at the congressional level, representatives who were DSA members came more from the ranks than today, the local officeholders very much socialize and depend on the collective to win and govern. Elected officials tied so closely to the socialist movement are the best tribunes for the working class.

But pride comes before the fall. Today, socialists still have a finite amount of support. It is unclear how much it is growing or not. DSA needs to be realistic: while it may not want to enter the Democratic Party networks and associations, it is now going to be winning over majorities even in the Democratic legislative caucuses soon. Still, DSA can influence public policy and build socialism by electing a handful of people that show tangible results. This will not happen by supporting a strategy, as some want, to make socialist electeds only accountable to DSA. Socialist Alternative did that with Kshama Sawant, which has never been duplicated even with DSA support, and the councilmember just barely survived a recall. Sawant's successful defense included national and local support from DSA.

Her troubles are a microcosm of the limit that socialist electoral politics faces in the immediate future. It is fun and exciting to discuss forming new parties. But the tougher and more salient question is, how do socialist elected officials co-govern in center-Left majorities while being accountable to their democratic (small d) organizations and progressive movements that elected them? If the Left cannot resolve these issues, voters will not trust us and expand our representation. This could be a slow march back to the 2010s and before, except now we'll have the weight of "remember when we almost had power." **IP**

[1] See D. L. Jacobs, "What was the Millennial Left?," *Platypus Review* 137 (June 2021), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/06/01/what-was-the-millennial-left/>; and Tom Canel, "The Millennial Left and the Democratic Party: A response to D. L. Jacobs," *Platypus Review* 140 (October 2021), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/10/01/the-millennial-left-and-the-democratic-party-a-response-to-d-l-jacobs/>.

[2] David Duhalde, "It's Party Time," *Dissent* (Winter 2020), available online at <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/its-party-time>.

[3] David Duhalde, "Socialists and Super PACs," *Jacobin*, June 27, 2020, available online at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/06/socialists-super-pacs-campaign-finance-justice-democrats>.

[4] Maggie Haberman, "Socialist Group Backs Sen. Joe Foe in Conn.," *New York Post*, September 18, 2006, available online at <https://nypost.com/2006/09/18/socialist-group-backs-sen-joe-foe-in-conn/>.

[5] Will Emmons and David Duhalde, "Return to the Countryside," *Jacobin*, November 5, 2012, available online at <https://jacobinmag.com/2012/11/return-to-the-countryside>.

[6] Rachel M. Cohen, "The Democratic Dilemma on Dark Money," *The American Prospect*, December 2, 2021, available online at <https://prospect.org/power/democratic-dilemma-on-dark-money/>.

[7] Since the NPC decided not to expel Jamaal Bowman, some chapters have voted to officially dissent from the position. A number of chapters have voted against dissenting, too. At the time of this writing, no chapter in his district has taken such a stance.

"How long is the end of history?" cont. from page 2

Left fails to garner working-class support. Indeed, should the Left prove unsuccessful in rooting itself more firmly among workers across the entire economy (not just public-sector workers and what remains of the unionized workforce), they will continue to promote "a 'progressive' agenda without challenging capital." Relegated to the "far-left flank of capital" in the realm of politics, socialists will find it difficult to resist the gravitational pull of the progressive wing of "institutional center-left parties" (146). This turn would leave the Left facing national conservatism and right populism in a minoritarian position, in which it will need to continue to rely on important urban centers as the middle ground is ceded Rightward everywhere else. If the future of Rightwing politics in this scenario is the nation state as fortress, then the Left will have to remain content with their "rebel cities" (149). However, none of this is new. What makes this moment unique is not that we haven't been here before. As I've tried to show, the death throes of neoliberalism echo the breakup of the New Deal order over the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, what is so noteworthy of our own time is that choosing to remain in stasis seems more and more impossible. The contradictions of capitalism that have been kept in check since the 1930s will be resolved one way or another: socialism or barbarism. While there are plenty of reasons for this to provoke an overwhelming sense of despair, there is a glimmer of hope in the working-class revolt that has emerged in response to the pandemic. Though still too early to tell, it is not impossible that we are witnessing the stirrings of a new labor movement in this sporadic self-activity. Should socialists among them figure out how to channel this new militancy, it could mean a new dawn for Left politics. **IP**

[1] Connor Harney, "Ending the Eternal Present: A Historical Materialist Account of the 1970s," *Cosmonaut*, October 17, 2020, available online at <https://cosmonautmag.com/2020/10/ending-the-eternal-present-a-historical-materialist-account-of-the-1970s/>.

[2] Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015). I would qualify this description of autocannibalism by saying that this process that helped hollow out the American heartland did not just pad the pockets of financial speculators, hedge-fund managers, along with executives and top-level corporate managers. The now liquid assets flowed from the developed to the developing world in order to keep labor costs down by producing in the developing world, at the same time preserving order at home through the proliferation of cheap goods.

[3] Ibid., 244.

[4] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 342.

[5] Two of the quintessential accounts are Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010) and *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, eds. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (New York: Verso, 2010). For a periodization of the "long 1970s," see Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2002).

[6] A classic account of the fight for workers' control, particularly over which postwar automation would take is David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Automation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[7] Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics & Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class*, 5th ed. (New York: Verso, 1999), 52.

[8] David Montgomery, *Worker's Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Struggle*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 167.

[9] Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Windham looks at NLRB elections data to show that the number of organizing drives actually increased in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly among jobs and professions that employed more women and people of color, and especially in the Sunbelt South. That is, those that were left out of the New Deal in the first place.

[10] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, 1930-1980, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 122–52.

[14] For anyone interested in the implications of the Keynesian origins of neoliberal fiscal and monetary policy see Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (New York: Verso, 2020) along with my review of it: Connor Harney, "Post-Scarcity without a Fully-Automated World," *Cosmonaut*, April 7, 2021, available online at <https://cosmonautmag.com/2021/04/post-scarcity-without-a-fully-automated-world/>.

[15] COLA refers to "cost-of-living adjustment." For further elaboration on the concept of the consumers' republic, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

[16] The authors characterize the politics of this period as one of "social-democratic tedium" as opposed to post-politics of the "liberal-democratic End of History."

[17] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

[18] Thomas F. Jackson, "The State, the Movement, and the Urban Poor: The War on Poverty and Political Mobilization in the 1960s," in *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History*, ed. Michael B. Katz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 406.

[19] Elizabeth Hinton, F*rom the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[20] Louis Hyman provides a good account of this (though I disagree with his conclusion that the contradictions of capitalism can be managed perpetually for the good of "the people" should democracy flourish. the whole history of the last century gives lie to this) in *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[21] Though these were not cited, the authors' arguments here are very similar to those put forth by Christopher Lasch in the essays "Populism, Socialism, and McGovernism" and "Is Revolution Obsolete?," in *World of Nations: Reflections on American History, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

[22] I've been grappling with the question of class among white-collar professionals and technical workers in my own historical research. Though, I've yet to fully address it, for now I think the responses that both Erik Olin Wright and Stanley Aronowitz provided to the Ehrenreichs at the time should suffice. Wright emphasized the contradictory location of those between capital and labor given the complexity of the division of labor in a modern economy. For example, one's role might functionally predispose them ideologically toward the bourgeoisie, but economically their position places them closer to the working class. He specifically uses the example of teachers whose official role is to assimilate their students into the norms of bourgeois soaciety, but their employment situation means that, like other workers, they have nothing to sell but their ability to work. See Erik Olin Wright, "Intellectuals and the Class Structure of Capitalist Society" in *Between Capital and Labor: The Professional Managerial Class*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979). Aronowitz contends that the professional and managerial components of the PMC should be taken separately, and importantly that they are not a class, but a stratum in-between. The managerial component represents a stratum dependent on capital that is ideologically opposed to certain forms of social relation under capitalism, but not capitalism as an economic system. Whereas his view of professionals is fairly in alignment with Wright, seeing them in a *contradictory location* that is "part of the apparatus of control," but also "to the extent that knowledge has become the main productive force in late capitalism, their work is transformed into mental labor." See Stanley Aronowitz, "The Professional-Managerial Class or Middle Strata," in *Between Labor and Capital*.

[23] This is by no means to say that all that matters is formal participation in electoral politics. The upsurge in labor militancy over the last year proves the power that workers can wield in the economic realm, particularly if that activity were to become more organized over time.

"Before you can be a pirate," cont. from page 3

loss of progressive candidate Chuy Garcia. Carlos may have endorsed Preckwinckle for resources. Theoretically, if we had the infrastructure, he wouldn't need to lean on her. I know that Preckwinkle's campaign was one of the few to actually build a turnout model for the election, and that kind of intelligence is highly critical to winning a campaign —

It didn't help her at all; she got shellacked!

GS: Well, what would it have been like if she *didn't* have that model? Also, there are many reasons why she lost. I don't think she lost because she was a machine candidate. She had bad press because of the corruption scandal with [alderman Edward] Burke. After that point, she was not able to raise any money. We knew she was going to lose after the first round of the election. The betting markets anticipated a 70 percent chance that Lightfoot was going to win. The polling indicated that Lightfoot was going to win. And, honestly, if you look at who voted for Lightfoot in the largest numbers, it's the North and West sides of Chicago right around the Loop. Those voters in my view, thought: Why do we want to vote for Preckwinkle, a Black woman, when we can vote for Lori Lightfoot, a Black woman who's also gay, whom we can also use to oppress people in Chicago?

WX: If Biden wins the Democratic nomination, what does the DSA do then?

GS: No organization should elect a candidate and then stop working. It's a full cycle, you never turn off, you never become complacent. When you elect a candidate, the thing that you do the next day is to begin the process of holding him accountable. So if he ends up not doing the things that you wanted him to do, you need to beat him, or you need to have your propaganda machine move against him. Whether Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden wins, DSA should do the same thing in either case. It should hold that candidate accountable and make sure that the outcomes are as close to its ideal policy positions as possible.

You said that you wanted to take the jobs of Democratic Party candidates. Platypus held a panel in Philadelphia recently on "Democracy and the Left," and one of the panelists, Adolph Reed Jr., said that between 6.5 and 9 million people who voted for Obama at least once, and Sanders for the primary, then voted for Trump. Some of those people believe that the Democratic Party was responsible for sinking their candidate. The DSA seems to have drawn a different lesson, which is that the Democratic Party is still a viable vehicle through which to fight for socialism. Moreover, you also have 58% of the eligible voters who didn't vote at all. So, I wonder, if your goal is socialism, what do you do with people who don't believe in the Democratic Party? If the goal is to take the jobs of the Democratic candidates, how do you mobilize this great majority who do not support the Democrats, who would need to be mobilized for socialism?

GS: That's a very hard question. How do we mobilize the masses to support socialism? It's less about supporting Democratic candidates. Electoral politics is interesting inasmuch as you can have a small minority of people who have the power to influence voter turnout. If Biden comes out of the primary as the Democratic candidate, I would definitely expect there to be much lower voter turnout, at least among particular demographic groups, than if Bernie Sanders were to emerge as the candidate. Whoever emerges from these initial rounds of the Democratic Party, the choice of candidate will enormously influence who shows up to vote on Election Day. That's how you can control it. If you purposefully do not run a neoliberal candidate, you can expect the electorate to be different. Maybe the Democrats who prefer Biden but not Sanders would stay home. I'm hoping we can trick them into voting for us anyway just because of the fear of Trump.

I wonder if focusing on the Democratic Party base and splitting the Democratic Party base is too myopic in terms of building socialism in America.

GS: Let's be very clear about what we mean by the Democratic Party base. There are multiple bases. There's the primary electorate, and then there's the general electorate. The general electorate is very much in flux depending on who the candidates are. Party plays a large role in it, but not the only role. You raised the Obama-Trump voters, which is an obsession of political scientists trying to figure out what about Trump appealed to them and why didn't they think that a "third term of Obama" under Hillary would be sufficient for it. These voters probably lost faith, not only in the candidates that we chose to push, but also in the Democratic Party itself.

You seem to suggest that there are two opposed objectives within the DSA at the moment. One is to take leadership of the existing Democratic Party with a slightly changed base, and the other is to start some kind of independent Socialist Party. I was wondering what your account of that rift looks like and how that has taken place? And also, what is the difference between these two objectives?

GS: Many members of the DSA are very young. Their experience of politics is new. So in terms of this rift that's potentially brewing — whether we should take the party or start a new party — Right now the DSA is not a party at all. I think it's incorporated as a nonprofit. I think we'll spend a lot of effort trying to take these candidates' seats. We're never going to fully take the party. The majority of the party is never going to be socialist. It's not going to occur. But what's important is getting high-profile candidates known nationally through this process of beating Democratic incumbents. This gives us a platform to actually start a new party, if we end up going in that direction.

There's a lot of conversation between individual members: should we do that, and when should we do that? It's not going to be a group making a choice. It's going to be organic. And, honestly, the people we're electing are going to lead the way. So if one of them or a group of them decides collectively that we are going to do something totally new, they are going to do that, and I think the DSA is going to follow them. **IP**

Transcribed by Desmund Hui, David Faes, and Clay Mills.

How long is the end of history?

Connor Harney

Book review: Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe, *The End of the End of History: Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2021).

Twilight of the eternal present

SHORTLY BEFORE JANUARY 2020, I began work on a longform essay I called "Ending the Eternal Present."[1] There, I outlined the intertwined political, economic, and cultural forces that helped make our own moment. Through the slow crackup of the postwar labor compact over the course of the late 1950s and the 1960s, accelerated by the crisis of the 1970s, neoliberalism was born, first as an economic response, and later, as political consensus. Our neon nostalgia for the 1980s may make it difficult to see in hindsight the stagnation and malaise of the decade, but the appearance of cocaine-fueled hedonism hid the rot at the center of the new order. Built on faulty foundations of financialization, the dynamic euphoria of the decade was more the product of what Steve Fraser calls "autocannibalism," or the process by which capital loots itself, leaving nothing, not even the copper wire, behind.[2] Though Michael Douglas's character Gordon Gecko's infamous motto, "greed is good," might imply otherwise, this speculative frenzy was not purely the product of avarice, but rather the needs of a capitalist system in crisis. Declining profitability marked the return of "the rigors of a survivalist competition" that produced "a kind of economic brinkmanship."[3] The dead hand of capital's logic meant that calculated risks (and some not so calculated) became the order of the day, no matter the stakes, and in spite of slowly creating a financial system too big to fail.

How did the working class meet capital's voracious appetite as it ate itself? If capital is indeed, as Marx wrote, "dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor," then the rusted-out factories that dotted much of the industrial geography of the advanced capitalist world stood as a testament to the fact that not only did capital feast on the living labor of the working class, it also played with its food.[4] The crumbling infrastructure built by the hands of their parents and grandparents, a chilling reminder of how one-sided the postwar compact had truly been — providing comfort and stability only as long as it was convenient to the requirements of capital accumulation. At the same time, the "Age of Acquiescence" was not as quiet as the name might imply, nor did the working class go without a fight. As some historians and sociologists have documented, the rank-and-file revolt against capital and the union bureaucracy during the "long 1970s," represented an important hinge point for the labor movement.[5] Inspired in part by the politics of the New Left, the economics of stagflation, and the new social movements of the era, this insurgency inside the labor movement pushed to fulfill a dream deferred in the immediate postwar years.[6] That is, the democratization of their organizations in hopes that they could wrest control of industry from capital by taking over more and more of the commanding heights of industry.

Two important moments marked the end of this dream until it emerged again in the 1970s: first, the passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947 after the massive strike wave of 1945–46, and second, the Treaty of Detroit in 1950, which signaled the union leadership's willingness to accept more bread and butter in exchange for dropping concerns over democracy in the workplace. As Mike Davis has written, the latter turning point formalized the collective bargaining regime that lasted until the Reagan years, which, on the one hand "conceded the permanence of union representation," and on the other, affirmed "the inviolability of managerial prerogatives."[7] Put more bluntly by David Montgomery: "the New Deal reform which initially offered substantial (if limited) benefits to the struggle for workers' control has evolved into a restrictive quagmire, from which working people are now striving to escape [in the 1970s]."[8] Unfortunately, the rank-and-file revolt was unable to lead the way out of this blind alley. The affluence that conditioned the compact between labor and capital gave way to malaise at the very moment that workers sought to change the terms of the agreement. As more and more workers previously excluded by the New Deal's system of collective bargaining sought representation by knocking on labor's door, the more apparent the weakness of that arrangement became.[9]

How long is the end of history?

I set up this historical political economic model, not to deny the value of the contemporary analysis of roughly the last 30 years (this writer's lifetime) in *The End of the End of History*. But if we are to take Fukuyama's framework seriously, as the writers clearly do, and we take the end of history to mean the triumph of liberalism through "the total exhaustion of viable alternatives," then we should as he did watch "the flow of events over the past decade or so"[10] — that is, the 1970s and 1980s, when political possibility outside of capitalist realism seemed to disappear past the horizon line. Nor, as the authors point out, was Fukuyama reveling in the end of history as some of his contemporaries were. Indeed, as a romantic conservative, he lamented the passage of history as "a very sad time" that marked the end of "worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination," replaced by technocratic rule that would shrink political questions to a struggle around the margins of the markets and consumer demand.[11] A reality that did not sit well with someone like Fukuyama, who was not only "ambivalent" toward the society that had emerged in the postwar years, but predicted that "the very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again."[12] *The End of the End of History* begins with this basic outline of the end of history for readers not familiar with the concept. The authors then proceed to explicate the politics, or more precisely, the post-politics of the end of history, counterposing them to the anti-political impulse best exemplified by populist movements of the Left and the Right that have emerged along with history's slow resuscitation.

By limiting themselves to this recent past, they miss an opportunity to look at the conditions that brought about history's end. It is important to emphasize as they do that the end of history is not marked by finality. More clearly, the path of history is not linear, but in fact, following "Hegel's real insight," a spiral: in that, "no order founded on human freedom can be ossified; all ends of history end, all modern political orders are eventually remade" (34). The authors qualify that the crack up of any political regime is by no means automatic. Not only that, but conscious efforts to change the world are often fraught because they require "a comprehensive vision of universal emancipation" along with a willingness to enact that program — repercussions be damned (34). What none of that tells us is why we should mark this particular end of history at 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc. Why should collapse signal the end, when, for the most part, actually existing socialism had long been stagnating by the time the Berlin Wall actually fell? Official Communism's collapse announced the end of the defensive holding pattern that existed at least from 1919 forward. Though some of the efforts at reform within the Soviet Union were well-intentioned, they failed to overcome the problem of isolation from the advanced capitalist world without a return of capitalism itself. But what of the prospects for an alternative to capitalism in the West? So-called liberal democracy could only triumph with the terrific trouncing of any and all radical alternatives, from the most militant strains of social democracy on down. The hard-won gains of past social movements eroded in the acid of a hegemonic neoliberalism after balking in the face of capitalist counterrevolution in the 1970s and 1980s. By the end of the Cold War, what was left of the Left was various sectarian organizations and cultural affinity groups that had long since been unmoored from the conditions that had created them. For all these reasons, I view the period under examination in *The End of the End of History* as a continuation of the long-term decline of not only radical alternatives to capitalism, but of capitalism writ large.

Fordism as neoliberalism's cradle

The failure of capitalism to provide more than a temporary fix to the crises that emerged over the course of the long 1970s has proved to be a Gordian knot since then. That is why I insist so emphatically on grappling not just with the political questions, but also with the underlying economic ones as well — a point I will pick up on more later. Returning to *The End of the End of History*, the book provides an important insight into the politics of neoliberalism. If neoliberalism was an attempt to restore capital's profitability through privatization, deregulation, and the creation of new markets by fiat, then the practical politics of neoliberalism is that of technocratic management. In other words, it was not about removing economic questions from the political arena, but rather that capitalism's preponderant hegemony turned those questions of form to kind. Debates about what kind of economic system to pursue ceased to matter, and instead became about what kind of capitalism politicians would help create in the name of their constituency. In this context, economic policy simply becomes the application of technical knowledge to create and optimize markets so that they work for whichever stakeholders are involved. However, the roots of this tendency go back further than the neoliberal turn. Indeed, while many on the Left look back favorably on the New Deal period, and for many reasons, rightfully so, the struggle over the shape of reform, whether the United States would be an industrial democracy or a paternalistic welfare state, was won by forces in favor of the latter and not the former.

Even today, many who hoped that the Biden administration would mean a return at the very least to the politics of the Fordist era failed to see the straight line between a certain kind of Keynesianism and the ruling neoliberal orthodoxy. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein provides an excellent framework for understanding the differences in Keynesian economics.[13] According to Lichtenstein, two dominant strains emerged over the course of the Great Depression; both sought to use the levers of the state to stimulate economic activity, but differed on how to do so. One was through social spending and the democratization of certain sectors of the American economy, driven by the corporate power of the labor movement. While the other, favored by business (though only certain segments and only ever somewhat favored), used financial incentives to lubricate commercial activity. However, as the collective bargaining system was formalized over the course of the 1940s and labor's congressional coalition failed to build a stronger social safety net, including a national healthcare system, the more radical demands for the commanding heights fell away. In the process a two-tiered welfare state was created, one for unionized workers and one for everyone else, at the same time reinforcing the commercial tendency within Keynesianism, prioritizing countercyclical spending and temporary tax cuts over more robust social spending.[14] With their organizations weakened by the structure of collective bargaining in the postwar years and political horizons effectively diminished by 1948, the consumers' republic was the perfect salve to disillusioned workers — consumption as political participation meshed neatly with the COLA agreements won through their earlier militancy.[15] For those given to this answer to the political question, their interest in workplace democracy faded from memory, while those who kept the flame alive believed mass politics of production to be increasingly outside their grasp. Instead, politics was carried out by self-selected elites steeped in the art of fine-tuning the economic machinery needed to maintain mass consumption.

Looked at in this light, the golden age does not shine as brightly as it does from those who advocate a return to the politics of postwar social democracy. While not quite "foreclosed," even at their peak, working-class politics was circumscribed by the structure of the compact between labor and capital to enough of an extent that I think that the *post*-political label applies (50–51).[16] Indeed, if post-politics, is "a form of government that tries to foreclose political contestation by emphasizing consensus, eradicating ideology and ruling through managerial technocracy," then there is no doubt that politics of the postwar labor peace fit under that rubric (45). The lines demarcating acceptable political debate were clear. Socialism had lost outside of the Iron Curtain: the mixed economy had won the day. Supposedly merging the bureaucratic efficiency of socialist economic planning with the technological dynamism and consumer freedom of capitalism, somehow this form of monopoly capitalism had smoothed out the rough edges that had made capitalism so prone to crisis in the past, leaving behind only what was best about the capitalist system. Or at least that's how the story went. Anything outside of this narrow consensus was seen as an anachronistic holdover from the past, not yet swept away by the tide of history. Either that, or radical politics were seen as unrealistically idealistic and utopian. Ironically, these same charges are now leveled at those that seek either a return to postwar politics or a more radical socialist alternative.

But beneath the surface of the postwar façade, cracks appeared that would ultimately bring the Fordist arrangement of that era to an end. As historian Tom Sugrue has shown with the example of Detroit, "the rusting of the Rust Belt" began long before the interlocking crises of the 1970s made them apparent.[17] While the 1950s is often thought of as the golden age of capitalism for the developed world, this prosperity was not as far reaching as is often imagined. It is certainly true that when compared to our own moment working people's slice of the pie was bigger. However, it is also true that the affluence of the affluent society was not shared by everyone. A combination of segregation in housing and employment left the city vulnerable to capital flight as white Detroiters fled increasingly to the suburbs — their jobs safe until automation and outsourcing cast them into the ranks of the reserve army of labor as well. Those left inside the city proper were left to fight over the scraps of what had once been the "arsenal of democracy."

Rather than soberly face diminishing expectations, many chose to write off the Rightward turn in American politics simply as racial backlash to the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s. That a certain racial animus animates American politics is such an incontrovertible truth that it is barely worth commenting on, but "backlash" fails to adequately capture what has happened in American society since the 1970s. If anything, the Civil Rights revolution was a limited one. Indeed, the Great Society, the central policy achievements of those seeking to universalize national prosperity through expanding the welfare state, "failed because it did too little, not too much, to overcome racial segregation, economic subordination, and the obstacles to self-determination in urban black communities."[18] Suffering from the same limitations as its New Deal predecessor, and without the threat of the same level of crisis, the War on Poverty and other liberal welfare programs of the 1960s were if anything even more of a top-down affair — seeing welfare recipients not as active political subjects, but as economic dependents. Looked at from this perspective, it should be no surprise that as funds for social programs dried up the only thing left to deal with the "culture of poverty" in American cities was the repressive apparatus of the state.[19] At the same time that the War on Poverty turned into the War on Drugs, even older social obligations of the state to the working class receded to be replaced by subsidies to important segments of the economy like real estate and finance. The problem of debt arose in direct relation to the shifting orientation of state intervention in the economy. Rather than provide goods and services directly, the state would back debt to encourage borrowing, ensuring continued consumer commerce while at the same time spurring the creation of new financial instruments.[20] Encumbered by debt and faced with an uncertain future, it should be no surprise that the politics of resentment took the form of a taxpayers' revolt. In the end, the death of New Deal liberalism proved the dead end of ethnic pluralist politics. With unprecedented economic growth there had been enough to redistribute while maintaining corporate profits. Stagnation changed the equation, revealing what had always been true, that the gains of the postwar economy had not been shared equally among working people. Not only that, but the logic of ethnic pluralism left workers to fight amongst each other to maintain or grow their slice of the pie at the expense of one another rather than together against capital.

Ebbs and flows at history's end

What I've just described should seem very familiar: economic crisis, liberal cultural elitism, populist resentment, along with Left failure and conservative cooptation characterize our own moment as much as they do the end of the postwar era. Looked at as a historical cycle, or more appropriately in this case, a loop, the value of the political analysis offered in *The End of the End of History* becomes more apparent. Stretching back the scope of time under scrutiny, as I have, adds more urgency to the task that the authors take up in navigating the maze of politics that may lead out of the eternal present. If we have lived it before we can live it again. What has been the response to the collapse of capital's current political regime? According to Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe, the liberal establishment response has been one of generalized "hysteria and catastrophism" which they call NOBS (Neoliberal Order Breakdown Syndrome), brought on by their inability "to accept, explain, or respond to political change" (60). For this establishment, the Right-wing populist moment, as exemplified by Donald Trump's presidency in the United States and Brexit in the UK, appeared as if barbarians were suddenly at the gates, setting their sights on storming the gates of all the sacred institutions of liberal democracy. That such a movement might arise organically in response to the ruling regime was out of the question. Instead, they attributed the rise of right populism to foreign conspiracies, trash TV, and racial resentment — anything to avoid pointing the finger at themselves. Whether a refusal to grasp their own "waning influence" or obfuscation as political theater, these explanations absolve them of responsibility, justifying their "chosen course of (in)action" (72–73).

Moving from this interrogation of the response to the return of politics, the authors look to understand the various forms of anti-politics that have so shaken the status quo from its slumber. The authors put forth seven forms of anti-politics: post-political and authoritarian anti-corruption politics, horizontalist, revolutionist, and defeatist Left anti-politics, along with Left and Right populism from above. For Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe, anti-corruption politics is demobilizing in both of its guises. In the post-political sense, it is not the form of government and its ruling institutions that are the problem, but instead it is the people in charge of them. Cleansed of the bad actors, the right experts can right the ship again. But this is not the only way that anti-politics activates the masses in order to demobilize them. If the state itself is seen as irreparably broken, sucking even well-meaning reformers into the swamp of corruption, politics *qua* politics becomes the problem. In this way, anti-corruption movements declare "that there can be no good government," foreclosing the "possibility of faithful political representation" and denying the possibility of "legitimate political authority" (83). This politics against the state lends itself to authoritarian cooptation, as the strongman promise to drain the swamp offers a transition out of the post-political status quo through the same politics as spectator sport. Overlapping with the political pessimism of the second form of anti-corruption politics, is the horizontalism of the 2010s, which "were above all about *participation without representation*" (91). It was this version of anti-politics that first introduced me to the Left more broadly during the Occupy moment, and I agree wholeheartedly that in many ways those kinds of politics were more about assuaging the consciences of those participating in protests by providing the appearance of "doing something" (92). This politics-as-collective-therapy failed to generate long-lasting organizations because the point was not to take power, but rather to change the world by waking the people still asleep from their slumber — spectacle, not the state, was their aim.

Horizontalism's failure caused a crisis of faith on the Left toward this position on political power. Those that embraced Left populism hoped to overcome horizontalism's aversion to representation by tying their hopes to new formal organizations or reform movements within existing parties, be it the creation of Podemos in Spain or Jeremy Corbyn's insurgency within the Labor Party. While populism dominated Left politics in the 2010s, a minority with their own aims on state power sought to rekindle a revolutionary flame. Drawn to the 19th and early-20th century conception of revolution as the insurrectionary encircling of the state, revolutionists of this kind conceive of change as only possible through an immediate rupture between past and present. Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe are quick to point out that it is not their desire for revolution that is the problem, but their failure to revise their conception of revolution for 21st century conditions.[21] For them, a sober assessment of our own moment shows that "low levels of even basic trade union militancy, let alone revolutionary movements, mean the horizon of revolution has drifted from view. The challenge today is to be neither naïve or cynical" (95). This means not simply pinning all hopes on a parliamentary road to socialism, nor to succumb to a Left defeatism that believes that the cards are so stacked against socialists that what is to be done is absolutely nothing. Cynicism of this kind lends itself to its own kind of magical thinking, either clinging to a vulgar generational-as-class politics or to a racial reductionism that hopes that changing demographics will lead to victory for the Left.

All of these various forms of anti-politics under consideration have one thing in common. They all grappled with the question of how to fill "the void where 'the people' should be" in our hollowed out political systems (115). However, none have been able to manage to achieve long-term, sustained participation from the people they want to reinvigorate the political system. Why is that? According to the authors, the problem has been the class character of these movements. Rather than represent the proletariat, the tribunes of the people that have helmed these movements have come primarily from the professional managerial class (PMC). It is in its seizing on this category where I find the most to quibble with *The End of the End of History*. While they correctly point out that the PMC has effectively become an "epithet to criticize better-off progressives," who have instrumentalized identity politics in service of narcissistic ends, they still pick up the concept — attempting to return it to the meaning given to it by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in the 1970s (127). But therein lies the problem. From its origin, "PMC" has been incoherent as a category for class analysis. Made up of a wide assortment of occupations including "managers, academics, teachers, administrators, technical workers, cultural producers, doctors, lawyers, etc." (importantly, the authors leave out nurses, originally included by the Ehrenreichs), the PMC "is not a class properly speaking," in that "it does not have a structurally antagonistic relationship to either capital or labor" (128). Their neutrality supposedly allows them to choose sides in the class struggle. Here is the rub. The authors go on to say that this position as a class of neutral arbiters is a matter of appearance, and that the PMC do indeed have unacknowledged "class interests" that they hide behind a veneer of "disinterested expertise" (130). Is what the PMC category describes an independent class with its own interest or is it something else?[22] My short answer is that the PMC is not a class, but instead that the category serves a political function, as the authors acknowledge. More importantly, the debate over the current class composition of Left politics is typically a cover for the inability of those involved to pose new answers to the question of why the working class tends toward inactivity on the political stage.[23]

Conclusion

Despite this point of contention, I do agree with Hochuli, Hoare, and Cunliffe's argument if the

"How long is the end of history?" continues on page 4